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A SEARCH INTO THE MEANING OF THE PAINTER'S  
CREATIVE IMAGES

by

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## INTRODUCTION

The thesis has been entitled, A Search into the Meaning of the Painter's Creative Images. The student has looked for the meaning of imagery in the form in which man's life is seen.

In the first part of the thesis the creation of imagery is discussed as a mental inevitability. The reflection and contemplation of mind upon the external world produces images of the world. Imagery is an inner achievement of man, for it is his perception, his contemplation, and his interpretation of contingency which gives meaning and makes possible his creation of form.

In this way, imagery is self-expression. This is the artist's approach to imagery as artistic form.

The student has sought to explain imagery as artistic form.

The need for a form intransitorily fixed arises from the brevity and irresoluteness of life. The exigency to discover the truth and permanence in things seen, goads the artist into creating a form which might transcend the definable appearances of an ephemeral existence.

The achievement of art form is the penetration beyond the semblance of an outward world.

This form, which underlies all outward manifestations, seeks expression as the unchangeable and intrinsic image.

Humanity is its thought.

In the final division of the thesis, the student has discussed her own work, relating it, for the most part, to the ideas already expressed.

The expressed images are fragments of the student's world which have come to have significant meaning to her.

As symbols of sight, perception, and understanding, the images have need to progress towards clarity, towards the ordering of the copious flow of imagery itself, to escape the trivial and transitory objects of experience.

The student knows of no time in which the fancies of the Maypole find their images in the grandeur of the Sea.

May I use a simile, the simile of the tree? The artist has studied this world of variety and has, we may suppose, unobtusively found his way in it. His sense of direction has brought order into the passing stream of image and experience. This sense of direction in nature and life, this branching and spreading array, I shall compare with the root of the tree.

From the root the sap flows to the artist, flows through him, flows to his eye.

Thus he stands as the trunk of the tree.

Battered and stirred by the strength of the flow, he moulds his vision into work.

As, in full view of the world, the crown of the tree unfolds and spreads in time and in space, so with his work.

Nobody would affirm that the tree grows its crown in the image of its root. Between above and below can be no mirrored reflection. It is obvious that different functions expanding in different elements must produce vital divergences.

But it is just the artist who at times is denied those departures from which his art demands. He has even been charged with incompetence and deliberate distortion.

And yet, standing at his appointed place, the trunk of the tree, he does nothing other than gather and pass on what comes to him from the depths. He neither serves nor rules—he transmits.

His position is humble. And the beauty at the crown is not his own. He is merely a channel.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Paul Klee, On Modern Art (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1948), p. 13.

Imagery comes to man throughout the continuation of his life. It is a form created through the reflections of his mind upon an external world and upon his own feelings in relation to that world. The image is a determinate form, a structure of mind's constituents, an expression of memory, imagination, intuition, and intellect.

Man's image of the world is expressive of contingency. As long as he has the sensations of being, he is able to form within his mind some image which reveals his world.

Life lives through his sentient being. It is cognizable because he undergoes it. Because he is capable of reflection and interpretation, he can achieve meaning.

Out of the brevity and desolation of an existential world comes the immeasurable intention, the determinate form. Out of reflection upon and contemplation of being, the image. Out of a pensive sadness born of discontent comes the union with joy, a component of the image. It is out of man's love that creativity is possible.

If the artist is capable, through his own chosen medium, he translates beyond space and time, what is the material reality of his life, what he has memory to recall, what he has intellect to know, into what he has vision to be. Better than man is good. Resuscitated from pasts of ignorance. Seeing beyond semblance and pretense.

Andre Malraux in his Psychology of Art writes that El Greco's View of Toledo began as a crucifixion. The city of Toledo appeared obscurely in the low corner of the painting. As the work progressed, as the painter saw, the imagery came to exceed the obvious pretext. The crucifixion disappeared. Toledo evolved, filled the entire canvas. It



reached its intention by radiating the image of a more significant and covert cross.

In the last self-portraits of Rembrandt this same illumination took place. The artist exceeded himself. It is as if he looked at man and saw Christ.

A fundamental problem concerning the painter, concerning thoughtful people, is the apprehension of reality and the search for truth. What is man? What has Rembrandt answered in the final voice of creativity? The works speak profoundly. For him, man enmeshed in humanity, servant of seasons. In the final looking and in the final knowing, man emerges pre-eminent. The tangles of the mesh become the engraved lines of his own face. This he has taken upon himself, a sorrowing world, a portrait of the last quiet dignity of man. Insupportably tragic and beautiful is his ultimate image. The soul and heart of man.

Man is not ubiquitous. All of his impressions and judgments are made incompletely. He sees in part, from where he stands as a participant, confined in vision and knowledge, restrained by boundaries of space and time. Yet his mind to its capacity is able to assimilate what he has seen. And men do cry this: I, too, have an image of myself and the mountain wall that encloses my cabin and my cabin which encloses me. Looking up, the sky is boundless, night illimitable, knowledge immeasurable. This I see. This I can express in some form.

The image of man's whole life becomes illuminating form.

There is an ancient Japanese poem written by Onakatami Yoshinobu which suggests this truth.

The deer which lives  
 On the evergreen mountain  
 Where there are no autumn leaves  
 Can know the coming of autumn  
 Only by its own cry.

The multiplicity of the world emerges in the disclosure of the images created by all men. This statement of individual interpretation gives to man the freedom and responsibility of relating and contributing his own illumination of life to humanity. In each expression given artistic form lies the essential nature of some sought after truth, some conclusion to man's seeking, some revelation of the spirit of man itself.

How does form become Art? To achieve Art, form must assume more than the self-expression or purgation of the artist.

In its development it discloses the individual portrait of the artist. But it must in its growth finally excel the self-portrait of the creator.

To make reference again to El Greco and Rembrandt. View of Toledo does not end as a semblance of the indeterminate city. The moving mass of dark clouds goes beyond the foreboding sign of an afternoon shower in summer. It is storming elsewhere. The painter is not so much concerned with representing only a natural phenomena. In the massing together of forms, the image becomes the symbol of a universal tension, the universal anticipation of an unknown force.

Rembrandt's self-portrait is not only an aggregation of his own life, a look at the conclusion of one man. This alone gives it eminence and a deep significance. But more than this, the artist has suggested

an ideal, and by reason of his relationship to humanity, to man graced with divine attributes, he has achieved Art.

The approach to artistic form is through self-expression. The arrival at artistic form lies in the ability to establish a spiritual relation to humanity.

Art form is a reality which succeeds in penetrating beyond the walls of material perceptions. The artist's creative forms may reach their own objective existence. This is the achievement of Art, the self-existence of the image on a high plane of generality.

All expression is related to some mental image which man has formed through the absorption of all things which are impressed upon his senses.

The process of creating the image is through induction, the individual choice and intake of particular external structures. The illumination of the external structures occurs in the creative mind. Here the constituents of mind, the imagination, intellect, spiritual intuition reflect upon and interpret the external form. The creative image is the conformation of the outwardly perceptible world with the intrinsic nature of man. The extent of experience, man's faculties of development, his creative intuitiveness, and in intelligible discernment of experience determines the complexity of his imagery. The capacity for complexity and the formation of design evolve from the insight, sensitivity, and knowledge of the creator. The levels of communication are relative to the complication of the imagery and the experience of the participants.

Where is the key to understanding the import which lies in the image? Early disclosure awaits in the origin of life itself, with man and the animal and vegetable world. The beginning of life is the experience shared by all living things. Growth is the essential action, free of conscious thought, normally occurring where there is life and nourishment. These two primal elements, life and growth, are the inceptions of the image. In the created work of a mature painter they are expressed intuitively. They may be obscure because of a progression into more complicated form. Yet these are the inevitable first parts of his language.

With growth comes complexity and differentiation. This truth is observed in the natural world, in the development of organisms and plant life. From bud to flower is expansion in the direction of a higher complicity. So it is in the progressive growth of organisms. And the increase in the intricacy of the form seems to augment the possibilities for achievement, purpose, and responsibility.

Yet at this point it seems necessary to say that the profundity of a work of art does not necessarily demand an obvious complicity in form.

Profoundness is complex but often achieves greater depth through simplicity of expression. Clarity in art is not always reached through involvement with technical devices. Rembrandt had mastered the technical aspect of painting. The image of himself is simple and direct in its form. Yet how complicated and delicate is its meaning. How profound the simple statement.

The artist could not create unless he believed that the drawn curved line may become the vital statement of the rim of his earth, that a horizontal line and a vertical line may become life and growth, the clarity of which nature does not provide.

So with the complexity of progressive growth comes a new difficulty. A limit to the capacity for complete understanding and communication. The difficulty lies in the failure to reach the ultimate levels of development.

On the basic level of understanding, man never becomes a tree. For him only the image of tree exists. But there is the possibility of empathy. Man, too, knows of participation in life and growth in an earth environment. If he reflects on this, his own sharing in the world, he can relate himself, to beginnings, to development in an organic world. Finally, on a high level of understanding, relating himself to man and to God.

The primal elements, life and growth, are the beginnings for interpretation. These may be simple first principles. However, complete manifestation of imagery calls for a higher level of interpretation since man lives on a higher level than that which demands only food and shelter for survival.

Artistic imagery in the final analysis is an intuitive, intellectual, and spiritual ordering of the flux of life. The importance of the form is that in its expression the mind, heart, and soul of man may survive.

Artistic imagery relates itself to basic values and identifies itself with the natural world, with man, and with man's activities,



for nature and humanity are its springs.

Over and over the artist in his struggle to relate the inner elements of himself to the essence of his world perceives and represents in his work an order, a dignity, and a peace, a relief for which a struggling and anxious humanity hungers. His main concern is the spiritual dimension of man.

The limitations of the artist are the limitations of man. He is confronted with ignorance, the boundaries of his own existence. He can offer only an interpretation of his own somatic, intellectual, and spiritual knowing. Yet through his interpretation and understanding, through his creativity, his life may come to speak in his art, a profound language.

Each of the art mediums contains its own potential promise for expression of the artist's image.

In the thesis exhibit, the student has representative works taken from the various mediums which she has studied and through which she has found herself able to give expression.

The approach to the different processes has been that of working with the medium, responding to its own demands in order to reach its fulfillment. The images have been chosen in response to the need of the student and the medium.

In wood block printing, in lithography, and in etching, the student has explored the possibilities of line. The use of this form is as far as she has gone, and even in this, she has not begun to exhaust the possibilities. Mass or solid form has been used very little, and the student

feels that this is one of her own limitations. The union of solid forms and lines in the graphic arts needs exploration as artistic expression.

Line is the main characteristic of the graphic arts. It is distinguished from color, shading, and massive form. The student can describe it as holding qualities which express outline, contour, clarity, animation, and directness. By its nature it cannot be disfigured. There is no possibility of deception. If a line is present in a work, it must be clear and strong. In its simplicity, it is powerful.

It was stated earlier in the thesis that artistic imagery is an intuitive, intellectual, and spiritual ordering of the external flux of life. Experimenting in the different mediums the student has learned that the actual process of creating a work, from the beginning, also, involves a discipline and ordering of herself and her materials. The materials are worthy of veneration and care, for they are the components of the work as much as are mind and hands.

In etching, for an example, the proper preparation of the plate requires discipline and care. There is an orderly procedure to follow from making the plate ready for the ground to the final step of printing the etched plate.

Lithography also proceeds through a similar series of preparatory steps, from the grinding of the stones to their printing.

Regardless of the significance of the image which the artist has created, his creative profundity may be lost if he fails to recognize and be responsible to his materials and their technical principles. His evaluation of these external tools cannot be over-emphasized for they are parts leading to the completion and integrity of his artistic expression.

Earlier in the thesis the statement was made that the artist could not create unless he believed that the drawn curved line may become the summation of two ideas, life and growth. The artist's image is the illuminating symbol of determinate form of his reflection upon and interpretation of life. The form depends upon the choice of the artist. That is, the choice of an image which will be expressive of his idea.

The student has worked from this point of view, that the aggregation of his perceptions may be expressed in the image.

For an example, in the etching #24, Tree and Spring Rain, trees are perceived. The rain and spring season are also intuitively understood. This knowing is transferred to line. If the work is successful, the change from the semblance of tree to the irradiation of tree has occurred. The line image is the illumination which the student has sought through contemplation and reflection upon the natural tree. She has sought to bring together an idea of tree, rain, spring in the simplicity of line, the meaning of each in relation to herself, their relation to each other, their tensions and their spatial dependence.

This same attitude is applied to the other work. The group of etchings on the ocean, marsh grass, water and boats contains the expressive images of these things as they became known to the student. She has transferred them, creating them through her use of line into an image which is itself a separate and self-existent entity, not intended to be a restatement of the original natural form.

The three thesis paintings are expressions of figures alone, together in groups, in relation to objects such as a table, a cup, and in relation to each other. There are problems of tensions established



in the spatial positions with one another and with objects. All forms are confronted with the problem of the limited space of the canvas, as all things are confined to the limited knowing of the student.

The figures, compositionally preconceived, were sketched on the board as a general idea.

The color was sketched in, directed towards achieving a general whole also. Then, each form was taken separately and broken into parts. The final work was to bring all the parts into a meaningful dependence upon each other. This was the extension of the form into singleness and a complex whole. Here the student is trying to represent an ordering of parts into a self-existence on a high plane of generality.

The world pervades man's being. His creating the image of its existence in artistic form is an inner achievement. It is man's inward life, the life of his spirit which gives him his faculty of perception. Because he sees, and because he expresses sight in form, he frees man and his world from the aloneness of obscurity, unidentity, and meaninglessness.

The image though individualized by the painter and expressing his identity in its form, yet may speak of the universal experience and identity of all men, human life intransitorily fixed.

The artist is seeking a relation to the finite world, and with a mind only able to prognosticate, he is probing the infinite for a meaning beyond the mountain wall.

Seeing in part, knowing in part, the creative image of the artist appears in part. The incompleteness of his work is the miracle of growth.

It necessitates a continuous creativeness.

There is an impulse from which man cannot free himself, his propensity for perfection, the good which he has vision to be.

The dignity, joy, and quietness which an artist would wish to express in his own being may find a small fulfillment in his work, where he vents what he has vision to be, beyond pretense, beyond ignorance: Better than man is good.

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